

Report on Our March, 1986 Visit

We just returned from the island in March. I went there with Society Expeditions as the archaeology lecturer and tour guide on a cruise from Puerto Montt in southern Chile to Easter Island. It was most interesting to approach the island from the sea rather than just dropping out of the sky. We were Out There in the ocean for days and days and days, and the vastness and emptiness of the South Pacific seas became a tangible thing. It certainly increased our respect for those daring Polynesian sailors who ventured out in their small sailing craft.

I noted some changes upon arrival. In particular, I missed old friends who have left for Tahiti or for the mainland. Things looked fairly prosperous, in that several new cars and vans were conspicuously parked at the airport in order to take tourists around the island. New public buildings have appeared and some private construction was going on.

The ancient moai which used to be at the corner across from the school has been replaced by a white-plastered moderne Chilean monument honoring Policarpo Toro. There is a new post office, government office buildings, and the new gym is finished. I was delighted to see that a new museum is being constructed, slightly downhill from the old museum building, which will become offices and storage. It is supposed to be finished in time for

the Chilean Independence Day celebration on the 18th of September. It has an innovative design with skylights and will be a far superior place for displays. Andrea Seelenfreund, who is just finishing her doctoral program at the University of Otago in N.Z., will be coming back to the island as curator of the museum.

One old friend died in the past year. Father David succumbed to a stroke, and is buried on the island. Over the years he generously allowed us to use his facilities to send shortwave messages back home, and we became quite well acquainted. Fr. Dave's brother flew over from the U.S. to conduct final rites. As it took ten days for him to arrive, and as embalming is not available on Easter, it was necessary to temporarily store Fr. Dave's body into the hospital freezer. Bob Weber (Sumner Bible Institute), whom you may have met on the island, had the job of sorting thru Fr. Dave's belongings and to his chagrin found trunks loaded with mementoes; seems he never threw away anything in his whole life, including report cards from the third grade. Took Bob a month to go through it all.

A new priest has replaced Fr. Dave. He has embarked on a project of remodeling the church, financed in part with bingo games. The church will have a new facade, a new roof, and real windows. No longer will birds fly in and out during mass, dropping little surprises on the faithful.

Commencing Our Fourth Field Season

During the upcoming fourth field season, we will be staying at a small new hotel, called Topara'a. It is on the side of a hill between Hotel Hangaroa and the group of buildings where the bank is located and it has a wonderful view out over the bay. It is very nice and all the rooms have real bathrooms AND hot water.

We will be renting an ancient Landrover which some of my first season people will recognize by its nickname, The African Queen. (Several of us were convinced the vehicle served with Rommel in the North African campaign). I was assured that it has been renovated and runs well. Those of you who helped push this conveyance at various times and places in 1981 no doubt will raise your eyebrows in disbelief.

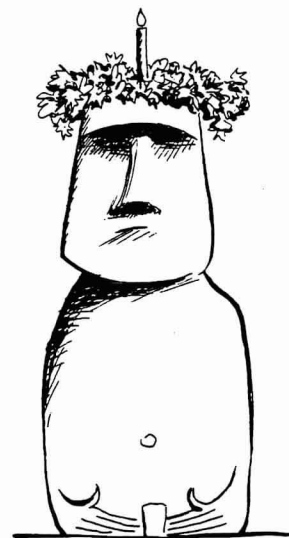
In the 1983 field season, we finished Orongo, as well as the whole area of Rano Kau on the exterior slopes, including Vai Atare. This was a prodigious effort, for the sacred site of Mata Ngarau, which has the heaviest concentration of petroglyphs in the area, contains some 1,239 individual elements. It was also one of the hair-raising sites as the rocks hang over a 1000 foot cliff. The final count (Mata Ngarau only) may be of interest: birdmen, 375; Makemake faces, 138; and komari (vulva-forms), 195.

It was a big help to have xerox copies of photos of Orongo's petroglyphs taken by Dr. Walter Koch of Chile in 1974. These were generously provided by the late Bob Alexander. Koch photographed the petroglyphs at night by using side lighting, which made many faint designs stand out more clearly. It was gratifying to note that our field drawings correlated very closely with the photographs.

All of you who worked so hard to record the petroglyph sites on Easter Island deserve a big "thank you". I couldn't have done it without you.

During the fourth field season, which consists of four separate UREP sessions, each of 2 weeks' duration, we will concentrate on recording the petroglyphs on the topknots at Puna Pau (the quarry for the topknots), petroglyphs at Omohe, and near Papa te Kena, north of Anakena. There are a few scattered sites along the south coast which have been missed, and we hope to finish off those, too.

We will think of you all when we spend our time off, relaxing on the pink sands of Ovahe, or while listening to the lonely cries of hawks as we climb up the slopes of Rano Raraku among the statues.



Peace, Love and Magic

Vandalism Continues

I was terribly depressed to see the vandalism which has been done to some rock art sites. In some cases, islanders have been "scoring" or scraping petroglyphs to make the design stand out more clearly, and I noted some at Orongo that had been damaged in this way.

The great panel at La Perouse Bay--those huge boat petroglyphs that we recorded--is ruined. Someone has scraped it terribly and it looks dreadful. I cried when I saw it.

The park guard at Orongo told me that the marvelous panel in the crater near the lake has been damaged by this same practice, in this case by members of the Chilean air force (FACH) who were trying to make a videotape of the site. I didn't have the heart to climb down to check it out.

The practice of scraping petroglyphs appears to be in response to the increase of tourists to the island, so that photographs can be more easily taken. I have sent a letter to the head of CONAF (equivalent of Nat'l Park Service), ICCROM (International Committee for Monuments), and to the governor of the island, Don Sergio Rapu, in the hope that something can be done to stop this practice.

"Sun Stones"

When we were on the island in March, we had the great good fortune to meet a noted astronomer, Dr. William Liller, formerly of Harvard University, and his Chilean wife, Matty. Liller was on the island photographing Halley's comet for NASA and we spent some time discussing the potential archaeo-astronomical features which have been tentatively suggested for the prehistoric culture.

We carefully measured and examined the "sun stones", as identified by Ferdon in 1961, and we have come to the conclusion that they were not used in the manner suggested, but that the cup-shaped depressions probably served some other ceremonial purpose instead. Liller and I have co-authored a paper dealing with this subject and have submitted it for publication; more about this in a later issue.

Liller became so enthused that he broadened his study to include the orientation of ahu, and is now writing up the results of his research. The orientation of ahu seems to show more promise than do the "sun stones", and it also appears quite likely that the solstices were being observed by sighting across from a fixed position toward certain mountain tops. This idea was first suggested by one of my participants, Dr. Malcolm Clark, and it appears to be "right on".

A fascinating tidbit was provided by Liller who checked out eclipses as seen from Easter Island between A.D. 0 and 1800, and found there were 36 "direct hits or near misses". But, between July 25, 762 and December 29, 772, there were FIVE eclipses--one every 2 years! Compare this to the average: at a given spot on earth there will be 1 total eclipse every 300 years. The eclipse in 772 occurred near sunset, close to the solstice--undoubtedly a sensational event.

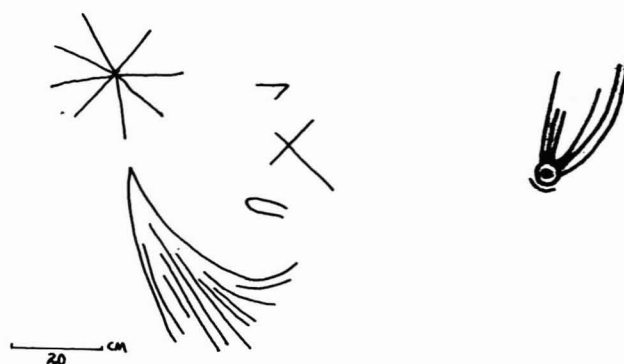
The Heyerdahl Haul

The other big news is the statue that Heyerdahl "walked". The moai in question is the one that formerly stood at the corner across the street from the school. This statue is fairly small and sits on very flat ground behind the new Post Office (it will be moved to the new museum).

Heyerdahl and helpers moved it four meters by tilting and rotating it while in an upright position, with the help of ropes. Of course, now all the Pascuans are saying this was THE way they were all moved in ancient times. Four meters is one thing; across the island over rugged terrain is something else.

The stone from which the statues is made is so friable that I think by the time it arrived from any distance, the moai would be worn down to the nostrils, and I would also expect that scars from the abrasion of the rope would be visible had this method been employed. It might have been ONE way SOME statues were moved over short and level distances, but I can't see it as practical over the long haul (no pun intended).

It was also determined that Halley's comet blazed through the Rapanui skies in 770 A.D. and this followed another bright comet in 760 A.D. We already have recorded several petroglyphs of comets on the island, two of them from Vai Atare. We are now taking a careful second look at some rock art panels for possible records of an eclipse.



Comet Petroglyphs from two sites at Vai Atare.

Publications

A paper of mine concerning Easter Island rock art is in an in-press issue of The Journal of New World Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 90024. The entire publication is about Easter Island, and papers by Joan Seaver and Jo Anne Van Tilburg, two of my former participants, are included. See the next issue of "Rapa Nui Notes" for an update. My dissertation is soon to be available through University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48106. The title is "Easter Island Rock Art: Ideological Symbols as Evidence of Socio-Political Change", by Georgia Lee, Ph.D. dissertation, Archaeology Program, UCLA, 1986.

Coming in Future Issues --

The Mystery of Katherine Routledge

"Shuttle Down" -- A Review

Report on the Fourth Field Season

Available from the same address is Jo Anne Van Tilburg's Ph.D. dissertation, "Power and Symbol: The Stylistic Analysis of Easter Island Monolithic Sculpture", UCLA, 1986. Jo Anne's study deals with the moai.

Next year we expect to have another one about Easter Island, as Joan Seaver completes her dissertation on the island's wood carving tradition.

I you haven't already done so, put Patrick Kirch's fine book, "The Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms" on your reading list. It is published by Cambridge University Press (1984), and I recommend it highly.

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View from eastern slopes of Rano Kau at Vai Atare. Proposed runway extension below to left; south coast in background; typical petroglyph of area is in foreground.



Dense basalt outcropping in the high grass at Vai Atare displays very old rock carvings. This site was recorded by University of California (UREP) crew during March, 1986.

Rapa Nui Notes

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